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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001456

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: GBRV SQUEEZING DEMOCRACY

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez and the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) are stepping up pressure on the opposition and civil society. Specifically, the GBRV is harassing opponents and the independent media, manufacturing coup plot agitprop, and disqualifying key opposition politicians from running for office. Electoral vulnerabilities in the November gubernatorial and mayoral elections are likely to exacerbate these disturbing trends as the GBRV endeavors to intimidate its democratic competition, unite its fractured followers, and distract public attention from its many failings. End Summary.

Turning Up the Heat

¶2. (C) President Chavez and the Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) are turning up the heat on the opposition and government critics in the run-up to the November 23 gubernatorial and mayoral elections. Earlier this year, the Comptroller's Office declared 272 current and former public officials ineligible to run based on administrative sanctions. The highly politicized Supreme Court ruled August 5 to uphold the Comptroller's actions. The measure disproportionately affected opposition candidates, including disqualifying particularly strong opposition candidates in the Caracas mayoral race and as many as three gubernatorial races.

¶3. (C) Military Intelligence (DIM) officials temporarily detained former Defense Minister General and GBRV critic Raul Baduel on October 3. Baduel was charged with misappropriation of funds and released with the prohibition against leaving the country and speaking to the media and a requirement to appear before a military court every 15 days. Prior to that, DIM personnel and officials from the Military Prosecutor's office searched Baduel's home on September 10 citing similar allegations. Unknown assailants fired numerous shots at Baduel's car earlier this year as he was driving with his son. He was unhurt. Baduel played an active role in the defeat of Chavez's constitutional reform package in the December 2007 referendum.

¶4. (C) Senior GBRV officials are leveling vague and undocumented accusations that business groups, the 2-D Movement, and military officials are engaged in a plot to assassinate President Chavez. The BRV has arrested two civilians, four retired military officers and one active duty military officer in this alleged plot, but so far, has failed

to make public any meaningful evidence of wrongdoing. Hard-line Chavistas are also accusing Alberto Federico Ravell, the owner of the opposition-oriented Globovision cable broadcaster, and Miguel Otero, owner of the independent El Nacional newspaper, of being coup plotters.

15. (C) The BRV forcibly expelled the America's Director and Deputy Director for Human Rights Watch September 18 following the release of the NGO's annual report on Venezuela. In at least seven instances since September, immigration and special police intelligence (DISIP) officials have requested that critics of the GBRV surrender their passports for "secondary" review at the airport. Immigration authorities at the Caracas airport canceled one passport, that of that of Heinz Sonntag, a member of the 2-D civil society pro-democracy movement. The GBRV has previously sought to restrict the ability of political opponents to travel. Critics of the government are reporting increasing difficulties in renewing passports and national identification documents.

16. (C) The BRV is also increasing pressure on independent media. Government sympathizers fired tear gas canisters September 23 at Globovision's headquarters in the early morning hours. Shortly afterwards, radical Chavista Lina Ron declared Ravel and Globo "military objectives of the Venezuelan popular militias." They did the same outside the headquarters of the opposition-oriented daily "El Nuevo Pais" on October 14. In addition, government officials and military police forcibly closed two radio stations in Guarico State that did not support United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) gubernatorial candidate William Lara. The stations were indirectly linked to incumbent Guarico Governor Eduardo Manuitt, whose daughter is also a gubernatorial candidate.

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Comment

17. (C) Many local pundits note that President Chavez does not pounce on you like a tiger, but slowly suffocates you like a boa constrictor. Chavez has been very effective over the last ten years in slowly eroding civil liberties, selectively targeting outspoken opponents, and eliminating checks and balances, while at the same time winning democratic elections. However, after widely perceived as going "too far," he suffered his first electoral defeat in the December 2007 constitutional referendum. He appears increasingly erratic and aggressive in his efforts to avoid a second consecutive defeat in the upcoming state and local elections. Chavez's PSUV candidates are still likely to win a significant majority of the gubernatorial and mayoral races, but the opposition expects to make noteworthy gains from its low-water mark in state and local elections in 2004. Such opposition victories would complicate Chavez's efforts to institute a one-party socialist revolution on Venezuela and undermine his democratic legitimacy.

CAULFIELD